Impact of benevolent leadership on follower taking charge

Roles of work engagement and role-breadth self-efficacy

Qin Xu
School of Economics and Management, Southeast University, Nanjing, China, and

Yixuan Zhao, Meng Xi and Shuming Zhao
School of Business, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

Abstract

Purpose – The topic of employees’ taking charge behaviors has garnered increasing interest in both practical and academic fields. Leaders play a critical role in influencing followers’ taking charge behaviors, yet few studies have explored the predicting role of benevolent leadership. Drawing from proactive motivation literature, this paper aims to investigate a moderated mediation model that examines work engagement as the mediator and role-breadth self-efficacy as the moderator in the relationship between benevolent leadership and taking charge.

Design/methodology/approach – Matched data were collected from 297 followers and their group leaders in three subsidiaries of a large telecommunication company in China. The authors used hierarchical linear modeling to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The results revealed that benevolent leadership was positively related to followers’ work engagement and consequently their taking charge behaviors. Moreover, such moderated mediation relationship was stronger among followers who had low rather than high levels of role-breadth self-efficacy.

Research limitations/implications – The primary contribution of this study is building a contingent model for the effect of benevolent leadership on follower taking charge and thereby extending the nomological networks of both benevolent leadership and taking charge literatures. Another contribution is that this research provides a new perspective to understand how leadership leads to followers’ taking charge behaviors.

Originality/value – This is the first study to investigate how and when benevolent leadership predicts follower taking charge.

Keywords Work engagement, Benevolent leadership, Taking charge, Role-breadth self-efficacy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Employees’ anticipatory and change-oriented actions play an increasingly critical role in determining sustainable competitive advantage for modern organizations (Crant, 2000). Previous literature has demonstrated that such proactive behaviors can enhance group performance (Frazier and Bowller, 2015), organizational success (Koop et al., 2000) and organizational goal achievement (Baer and Frese, 2003). Not surprisingly, organizations are not only searching for proactive employees but also motivating employees to perform a wide

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range of proactive behaviors (Bindl and Parker, 2011; Wu et al., 2017). Among them, taking charge, defined as “voluntary and constructive efforts... to effect organizationally functional change with respect to how work is executed within the contexts of their jobs, work units, or organizations” (Morrison and Phelps, 1999, p. 403), has garnered wide attention (Burnett et al., 2015; Li et al., 2015).

Although research has shown that leadership behaviors such as transformational leadership are key environmental motivators for taking charge (Choi, 2007; Li et al., 2015), much less is known about why and for whom benevolent leadership leads to taking charge. Followers often engage in taking charge behaviors to improve the organization’s efficiency and effectiveness. Led by a benevolent leader who always play a paternalistic role with fatherly benevolence (Cheng et al., 2000; Zhao, 2016), followers may be strongly encouraged to think and act for the good of the organization. Compared to the wide-spread interest in Confucian cultural values (Li et al., 2018), of which the central doctrine is the virtue of ren (goodness or benevolence), relatively little attention has been paid to the role of benevolent leaders in encouraging followers’ work behaviors in terms of taking charge. Therefore, drawing from the model of proactive motivation and affect and self-efficacy theories (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Parker, 1998; Parker et al., 2010; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), we propose and test a moderated mediation model in which work engagement works as a mediator and role-breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) as a second-stage moderator in the relationship between benevolent leadership and taking charge.

Specifically, the model of proactive motivation posits that there are several psychological motivations for an individual to engage in proactive behaviors, among which the “energized to” form of proactive motivation – an individual’s affective state, is an important underlying motivation (Parker et al., 2010). Moreover, followers under benevolent leaders can easily experience positive feelings such as inspired, happy and attentive because such leaders meet their personal needs and devote all their energy to them. Accordingly, this study adopts this “energized to” motivation perspective and casts work engagement as a form of this motivation, which links benevolent leadership to follower taking charge. In addition, the majority of recent research has focused on psychological motivations in isolation (Fuller et al., 2012). To address the call for more research on the interactive effect of different proactive motivations (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010), this study takes the “can do” form of motivation – an individual’s perceived capability of being proactive – into consideration. As a widely studied motivation, RBSE is important for bringing about change (Parker, 1998; Parker et al., 2006) and may exert its influence on the engagement in taking charge. Hence, we argue that the work engagement – taking charge linkage will depend upon employees’ level of RBSE. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

This study seeks to make three critical contributions to the benevolent leadership and taking charge literatures. First, we seek to further extend the nomological network of taking charge by emphasizing that leaders’ benevolence is a powerful predictor. Second, we extend the proactive behavior literature by examining the “energized to” motivation and meanwhile add to the limited benevolent leadership research by extending the previous relational

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**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

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mechanisms regarding leaders to work-related affective mechanism (Chan and Mak, 2012; Parker et al., 2010; Wang and Cheng, 2010). Finally, in considering followers’ RBSE as a moderator, we extend previous research by integrating different proactive motivations and investigating the boundary condition under which benevolent leaders can effectively influence follower taking charge (Bindl and Parker, 2011).

2. Theories and hypotheses

2.1 Benevolent leadership and taking charge

In their review, Parker et al. (2010) pointed out that individual difference and situational factors were distal antecedents, and several psychological motivations were proximal antecedents of individual proactive behavior. Although a variety of different contextual factors have been found to predict proactive behavior, scholars consistently viewed leadership as an important and unneglectable predictor. Leaders, as the representatives of authority, played a critical role in affecting followers’ behaviors and feelings. Previous studies have shown that subordinates engage in proactive behavior when their leaders exhibit supportive, transformational and ethical actions (Avey et al., 2012; Choi, 2007; Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012; Li et al., 2015). Such leadership actions may be universal, but in the Chinese context, benevolent leadership matters. Benevolent leadership has been nearly unaffected through profound transitions of rapid globalization and modernization (Farh et al., 2008; Wang and Cheng, 2010). It has been broadly viewed as a constructive and most welcome leadership style by employees (Chan and Mak, 2012). Benevolent leadership behavior is demonstrated as a form of individualized care within and beyond work domain, such as providing coaching and mentoring, showing good care to followers for career development, treating followers as family members and helping followers during their personal crises (Aycan, 2006; Farh et al., 2008; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008).

Unsurprisingly, benevolent leaders can exert their influence on followers’ taking charge for the following reasons. First, benevolent leaders provide task-related resources and recognition to followers (Farh and Cheng, 2000; Wang and Cheng, 2010). As a consequence, followers may feel obligated to reciprocate such good treatments by taking initiative to improve their work methods and procedures. Second, followers who perceive high levels of benevolent leadership are likely to experience a strong sense of gratitude (Cheng et al., 2004) and high levels of affective trust (Chen et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2011), thereby resulting in higher frequency of taking charge. Empirically, although the association between benevolent leadership and taking charge has not been examined directly, indirect support can be taken from voice literature. Voice can be proactive; moreover, it is more verbal and focuses on communication rather than on implementation (Fuller et al., 2012; Zhao, 2014). Both Zhang et al. (2015) and Chan (2014) reported a positive and significant relationship between benevolent leadership and voice. In light of the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\[ H1 \]: Benevolent leadership is positively related to follower taking charge.

2.2 The role of work engagement

2.2.1 Work engagement and taking charge. As a work-related affect, work engagement was first defined as a “persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 417). Later, Rich et al. (2010) provided a more precise definition and referred to it as “the simultaneous investment of an individual’s physical, cognitive and emotional energy” (p. 619). Work engagement is expected to predict employee well-being and behavior because it is a positive work-related experience (Schaufeli et al., 2002), reflects full
investment of energies (Rich et al., 2010) and helps employees derive positive meanings from stressful work as well (Sonnentag, 2003).

Benevolent leaders are supportive, considerate, helpful and caring, which may play a central role in predicting work engagement (Chan and Mak, 2012; Christian et al., 2011). First, drawing from affective events theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) because benevolent leaders are energetic, allow opportunities to correct mistakes and think in a positive way, they are likely to fulfill followers’ needs and induce positive emotions in their followers (Chen et al., 2014). Second, benevolent leaders are viewed as showing concern for individual needs, being willing to aid during personal crisis and offering task resources. Therefore, followers are likely to be grateful (Cheng et al., 2004). Third, leaders’ benevolence is an important element of trustworthiness, which can boost a high level of trust (Mayer et al., 1995). In other words, benevolent leadership behaviors are likely to make followers perceive that leaders treat them with goodwill and care for their best interest. As a consequence, followers tend to behave with good intentions as well (Chen et al., 2014). Taken together, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Benevolent leadership is positively related to follower work engagement.

2.2.2 Mediating role of work engagement. Except for the interest in what predicts taking charge, one area that has also been emphasized is how taking charge is motivated. Proactive motivation is critical because it is generally considered to be the most proximal antecedent of proactive behavior (Parker et al., 2010). Drawing upon the proactive motivation literature, a “can do” motivation answers the question “Can I do this?” and reflects an individual’s perceived capability of being proactive. An “energized to” motivation answers the question “Do I have the energy to do it?” and refers to an individual’s affective energy to be proactive. Moreover, it is very likely that benevolent leadership exerts an influence on followers’ affective feelings (Chen et al., 2014). Empirical evidence has shown that leaders sometimes have a weak effect on followers’ perceptions of capability (Parker et al., 2006), but such perceptions are important because when followers have confidence in their capabilities, they will implement new procedures as well (Li et al., 2015; Ohly and Fritz, 2007). Given that insufficient attention has been paid to the role that affective experiences play in impacting taking charge (Grant and Ashford, 2008, p. 22), this study first proposes that work engagement, which reflects an individual’s affective energy or “energized to” motivation, works as a mediator in the relationship between benevolent leadership and taking charge.

Drawing from the broaden-and-build theory of positive affect (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001), the positive affect broadens a person’s momentary motivation, thereby helping to build enduring cognitive-motivational resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. More relevantly, high levels of work engagement result in higher frequencies of taking charge because employees have enough resources to initiative bring changes to the current circumstance (Sonnentag, 2003). In addition, high levels of work engagement are likely to broaden individuals’ thinking, encourage the setting of higher and more challenging goals and build enduring capabilities (Bindl and Parker, 2011). Low levels of work engagement, by contrast, are less likely to promote taking charge because such employees have less energy available and do not pay full attention to their jobs; therefore, they have fewer opportunities to anticipate a potential problem or develop a new idea. At an empirical level, researchers have reported a positive relationship between work engagement and proactive behavior in terms of personal initiative (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012; Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008; Sonnentag, 2003).

Taken together and underpinned by affective events theory, followers receive benevolent leaders’ individualized favors, possess opportunities for future promotion and form high-
quality relationships (Wang and Cheng, 2010). Therefore, they tend to experience positive affective feelings about work, which in turn result in high levels of taking charge. Work engagement plays an important role in mediating the impact of benevolent leadership on taking charge. Empirical studies provide some indirect support to this argument, as work engagement is significantly related to both leader-member exchange relationship and personal initiative (Christian et al., 2011; Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008; Sonnentag, 2003). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H3. Work engagement mediates the relationship between benevolent leadership and taking charge.

2.3 Moderating role of role-breadth self-efficacy

As aforementioned, benevolent leadership may promote taking charge behaviors through the “energized to” motivation, namely, work engagement. This psychological motivation can be further explained by combining the insights emerged from research on RBSE, which was defined as “the extent to which people feel confident that they are able to carry out a broader and more proactive role, beyond traditional prescribed technical requirements” (Parker, 1998, p. 835). This literature holds that RBSE reflects the “can do” motivation, which may interact with other motivations to influence the exhibition of taking charge (Fuller et al., 2012). As such, we extend previous studies on the mediated relationships by investigating the moderating effect of RBSE in the linkage between work engagement and taking charge.

Individuals with high RBSE are apt to feel that they can control the situation and judge that their behaviors will be successful (Parker et al., 2006). They are likely to be capable of accomplishing and even being proactive, to be persistent over difficult times, as well as to choose more challenging goals (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012; Griffin et al., 2010; Lent et al., 1986; Locke and Latham, 1990). On the contrary, those with low RBSE are less likely to have confidence in their capabilities and are less willing to take risks (Griffin et al., 2010). They are also less apt to expand their tasks and have the capabilities of control. On the basis of affect and self-efficacy theories, because engaged individuals have the affective resources to take more responsibilities and to achieve a longer-term gain, followers with low RBSE are more likely to be motivated to engage in self-initiated and future-focused behaviors. Conversely, individuals with high RBSE are more persistent and are less likely to rely on their own affect to make decisions on how to be proactive, therefore resulting in a weaker relationship between work engagement and taking charge. This line of argument can be termed as a substitutive interaction, in that the “can do” motivation substitutes the “energized to” motivation to predict individual taking charge. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H4. RBSE moderates the relationship between work engagement and taking charge, such that the positive relationship between work engagement and taking charge will be stronger among followers with low RBSE.

2.4 Moderated mediation relationship

Combining H3 and H4, it is possible that RBSE will influence the strength of the indirect relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ taking charge, as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, for low RBSE followers, benevolent leadership and work engagement are more strongly related to taking charge because they rely more on their leaders and the affective state to achieve high levels of taking charge. By contrast, benevolent leadership behaviors and the resultant work engagement are less likely to serve as an energy pool for
high RBSE followers, and thus benevolent leadership and work engagement make less contribution to the high RBSE followers’ taking charge. Thus, we further propose the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

\[ H5. \text{ RBSE moderates the strength of the mediated relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ taking charge through work engagement, such that the mediated relationship is stronger under low RBSE than high RBSE.} \]

3. Method

3.1 Sample and procedure

Data were collected from three subsidiaries of a large telecommunication corporation in China. We first got the approval from an executive manager and then received helps from the respective HR managers. These HR managers were responsible for informing the employees and their group leaders and sending emails. At time 1, online questionnaire linkages were distributed by email to 445 employees. The questionnaires contain the measure of benevolent leadership and employees’ demographic information. About three weeks later, separate questionnaire linkages were distributed by email to those employees and their group leaders. Employees reported their work engagement and RBSE and group leaders rated their employees’ taking charge behaviors at work.

After eliminating questionnaires with unmatched leader-employee dyads across two-time points, a total of 306 employees supervised by 52 group leaders from the three subsidiaries remained and constituted the sample of the study. After deleting nine outliers, the final sample included 297 employees and their 51 group leaders. Of the 297 employee respondents, 69.4 per cent were men, 90.6 per cent had a bachelor degree or higher, the average tenure with the organization was 3.65 years, 39.7 per cent of the employees worked with their group leaders for 1 to 3 years and 23.9 per cent of the employees worked with their leaders for more than three years.

3.2 Measures

All of the measures were originally constructed in English. The conventional back-translation method (Brislin, 1980) was used to translate the measures into Chinese and then back into English.

3.2.1 Benevolent leadership. Benevolent leadership was assessed using seven items from Cheng et al. (2000). A sample item is “My supervisor is like a family member when he/she gets along with us.” Response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of benevolent leadership was 0.92.

3.2.2 Work engagement. Work engagement was measured using nine items from Schaufeli et al. (2002). A sample item is “At my work, I feel bursting with energy.” Response options ranged from 0 = never to 6 = always. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of work engagement was 0.97.

3.2.3 Role-breadth self-efficacy. RBSE was measured using seven items from Parker et al. (2006). A sample item is “I feel confident analyzing a long-term problem to find a solution.” Response options ranged from 1 = not at all confident to 5 = very confident. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of RBSE was 0.92.

3.2.4 Taking charge. We measured taking charge by using three items with the highest factor loading from Morrison and Phelps (1999). A sample item is “This subordinate tries to bring about improved procedures in the workplace.” Response options ranged from 1 = never to 5 = always. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of taking charge was 0.88.
3.2.5 Controls. We controlled four demographic variables of employees including gender (1 “female”, 0 “male”), education (1 “vocational or less”, 2 “bachelor”, 3 “master or more”), organizational tenure (in years), and tenure with the group leader (1 “less than six months”, 2 “six to twelve months”, 3 “1 to 3 years”, 4 “more than 3 years”).

3.3 Data analysis
As followers were partially nested within group leaders, we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM 6.0; Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002) to test our hypotheses. In this study, benevolent leadership, work engagement, RBSE, controls and taking charge were individual-level (Level 1) predictors. There were no group-level (Level 2) variables in the analysis. Following convention, the nesting effect was taken into consideration by allowing a random intercept (Gong et al., 2009; Zhu and Akhtar, 2014). To test and confirm the mediating effect, we followed the recommendations from Baron and Kenny (1986) and Preacher and Hayes (2008). To test the moderating effect, we used Aiken and West’s (1991) procedure and grand-mean-centered work engagement and RBSE; that is, the overall mean of each variable was subtracted from every case of that variable (Hofmann and Gavin, 1998). To assess the moderated mediation, we followed Preacher et al.’s (2007) procedure.

4. Results
4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis
We performed a CFA on the three self-report constructs to examine discriminant validities. As presented in Table I, the goodness-of-fit statistics of the baseline model (Model 3) indicates that our measurement model had a good fit: $\chi^2 (87) = 215.62$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, non-normed fit index (NNFI) = 0.98. Then we compared the baseline model with two alternative models. The results in Table I show that the two-factor model with the combination of work engagement and RBSE ($\Delta \chi^2 (2) = 305.78, p < 0.01$) and the one-factor model with the combination of all three factors ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 2499.46$) were worse. Therefore, it is appropriate to view the three variables as distinctive. Means, standard deviations and correlations of the key variables and controls are shown in Table II.

4.2 Hypotheses testing
4.2.1 Mediation hypothesis. H1 and H2 predict that benevolent leadership is positively related to follower taking charge and work engagement. As shown in Table II, results indicate that benevolent leadership is positively related to follower taking charge ($\gamma = 0.09, p < 0.05$) and work engagement ($\gamma = 0.44, p < 0.01$). Therefore, H1 and H2 are supported.

To test the mediation hypothesis, we followed Baron and Kenny’s (1986) suggestion. Results indicate that benevolent leadership is non-significant ($\gamma = 0.04, ns$), but work engagement is significant ($\gamma = 0.09, p < 0.01$). We further tested the indirect effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2$</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-factor model (BL + WE + RBSE)</td>
<td>2715.08</td>
<td>2499.46**</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-factor model (BL, WE + RBSE)</td>
<td>521.40</td>
<td>305.78**</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline model (BL, WE, RBSE)</td>
<td>215.62</td>
<td>90.00</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $N = 297$. BL = Benevolent Leadership, RBSE = Role-Breadth Self-Efficacy, WE = Work Engagement; **$p < 0.01$
(Preacher and Hayes, 2008) between benevolent leadership and taking charge. The indirect effect of benevolent leadership on taking charge via work engagement is 0.05, and the 95 per cent bias-corrected confidence interval around the bootstrapped indirect effect do not include zero (bias-corrected CI = [0.02, 0.09]). Taken together, H3 is supported (Table III).

4.2.2 Moderated mediation hypothesis. H4 predicts that RBSE moderates the relationship between work engagement and taking charge. As shown in Table IV, the interactive effect between work engagement and RBSE is significantly related to taking charge ($\gamma = -0.08$, $p < 0.01$). To interpret the interaction effect, we followed the suggestion of Aiken and West (1991) and conducted simple slopes analysis. We defined the high and low RBSE values as plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of RBSE. The plot is presented in Figure 2. Consistently, the relationship between work engagement and taking charge is stronger for followers with low RBSE (simple slope = 0.12, $p < 0.01$) than for those with high RBSE (simple slope = −0.04, ns). The results support H4.

Finally, H5 further predicts that the strength of indirect effect through work engagement is conditional on RBSE. Following Preacher et al.’s (2007) recommendation, we operationalized high and low RBSE as one standard deviation above and below the mean. As presented in Table V, results show that the conditional indirect effect of benevolent leadership on taking charge via work engagement is stronger and significant for followers with low RBSE (normal distribution = 0.08, $p < 0.05$; bootstrap method = 0.08, $p < 0.01$) but is insignificant for followers with high RBSE (normal distribution = −0.01, ns; bootstrap method = −0.02, ns). Moreover, the slope difference test indicates a significant difference of

![Table II](image-url)

**Table II.** Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Education</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tenure with leader</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tenure with organization</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.46**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Benevolent leadership</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Work engagement</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>(0.97)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. RBSE</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.24***</td>
<td>0.69**</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Taking charge</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>−0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.19***</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $N = 297$. Internal consistency estimates (alphas) are on the diagonal; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

![Table III](image-url)

**Table III.** Results of hierarchical linear model for mediation on taking charge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Work engagement</th>
<th>Taking charge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>−0.07 (0.12)</td>
<td>−0.07 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.07 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure with supervisor</td>
<td>−0.01 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.09** (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure with organization</td>
<td>−0.00 (0.02)</td>
<td>−0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolent leadership</td>
<td>0.44** (0.07)</td>
<td>0.09* (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $N = 297$. In all models, gamma coefficients are presented, and the corresponding standard errors are reported in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$
the indirect mediation effects between the high RBSE and low RBSE conditions (difference = 0.09, \( p < 0.01 \)). Therefore, \( H5 \) is supported.

### 5. Discussion and conclusion

#### 5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that work engagement mediated the relationship between benevolent leadership and followers’ taking charge. Furthermore, the effect of work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Taking charge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.05 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure with supervisor</td>
<td>0.09** (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure with organization</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolent leadership</td>
<td>0.05 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work engagement</td>
<td>0.04 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBSE</td>
<td>0.08 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderating effect</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work engagement (\times) RBSE</td>
<td>-0.08** (0.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** \( N = 297 \). Gamma coefficients are presented, and the corresponding standard errors are reported in parentheses; * \( p < 0.05 \), ** \( p < 0.01 \)

### Table IV.
Results of hierarchical linear model for moderation by RBSE

### Figure 2.
Interaction effect of work engagement and RBSE on taking charge

### Table V.
Moderated mediation results for work engagement across levels of RBSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderator: RBSE</th>
<th>Conditional indirect effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal distribution</td>
<td>Low (-1 SD)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (+1 SD)</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bootstrap method</td>
<td>Low (-1 SD)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High (+1 SD)</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Bootstrap sample size = 5000
engagement on taking charge was moderated by RBSE. Work engagement was positively related to taking charge only for followers with low RBSE. Results also indicated that the mediated association between benevolent leadership and follower taking charge via work engagement was stronger under low RBSE. We will discuss the theoretical and practical implications in the following.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The primary contribution of this study is building a contingent model for the effect of benevolent leadership on follower taking charge and thereby extending the nomological networks of both benevolent leadership and proactive behavior literatures. Previous studies have investigated the influence of benevolent leadership on follower suggestion-making behaviors (Chan, 2014; Zhang et al., 2015). This study goes a step further by showing that under benevolent leaders, employees can proactively engage in executions and implementations, which are more behavioral than voice (Fuller et al., 2012; Parker and Collins, 2010).

Another contribution is that this research provides a new perspective to understand how leadership leads to proactive behavior. In general, the findings support the proposition of “energized to” proactive motivation by Parker et al. (2010). The results suggest that followers of a benevolent leader are prone to experience positive emotions and have full energy, resulting in constructive efforts to bring about functional change. We extend the extant literature by showing that benevolent leaders can affect followers not only by building high-quality relationships and increasing their standing and status (Zhang et al., 2015) but also by enhancing their positive emotions and enlarging their energy pool. Moreover, the findings help highlight the role of “energized to” motivation as a critical underlying mechanism to explain the leadership-proactive behavior linkage because researchers have reported that high-quality exchange relationships, recognition and respect in an organization is associated with work engagement (Christian et al., 2011).

Third, our findings advance our understanding of the integration of the proactive motivation literature. Previous research has found that the “can do” form of proactive motivation combined with the “reason to” form of proactive motivation to predict individual proactive performance (Fuller et al., 2012). This study offers empirical support for the contention that the “energized to” form of proactive motivation works together with the “can do” form of proactive motivation. Specifically, the finding that work engagement may substitute for a lack of RBSE provides empirical support for Parker et al.’s (2010) argument that the “energized to” motivation is another key mechanism. Our results demonstrate that positive affective energy is likely to lead to more flexible cognitive motivation and build more enduring capabilities of individuals, thereby replacing the effect of RBSE.

Finally, the findings of the present study show that the mediated association between benevolent leadership and follower taking charge via work engagement is stronger for followers with low RBSE. In line with Fredrickson’s (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build model, work engagement promotes the setting of higher and more challenging goals and the building of more enduring capabilities that will help individuals to take proactive actions. From the social cognitive perspective, this motivation seems to be more effective for individuals with low RBSE because they lack confidence in their capabilities of carrying out proactive activities. Thus, this research identifies a new boundary condition (i.e. low RBSE) that impacts how benevolent leadership has an effect on followers’ taking charge, especially via work engagement. Our moderated mediation finding further confirms the significance of integrating multiple lens of research (i.e. work engagement and RBSE) when investigating benevolent leadership processes.
5.3 Practical implications
This study also has several practical implications for organizations to boost the level of taking charge. First, we have shown that benevolent leadership has a positive effect on followers’ positive affective experience at work and their taking charge actions; thus, managers of the organizations should provide adequate resources and trainings to supervisors to act more benevolently and encourage supervisors’ two-way communications between supervisor and followers for followers to perceive high levels of benevolent leadership. In addition, this study found that benevolent leadership did not directly influence taking charge but indirectly via increased levels of work engagement. Our finding that engagement is directly related to taking charge offers the possibility to enhance work engagement through other means than through increasing benevolent leadership to motivate taking charge behaviors. For example, Rich et al. (2010) reported that engagement might be boosted by enhancing levels of organizational support, value congruence and core self-evaluations. Hence, organizations may provide more resources, offer training programs to communicate a consistent set of organizational values and use staffing practices to select employees who are high in core self-evaluations.

Finally, our results indicated that the effect of followers’ work engagement on taking charge was stronger among followers with low RBSE. Because employees with low RBSE have low cognitive resources to take more responsibilities and have less confidence in their capabilities and willingness to take risks (Griffin et al., 2010), organizations should identify and pay more attention to them, provide conditions and resources to make them feel more confident, perceive positive affective experience at work, then encourage them to do more proactive behaviors. Furthermore, we found that the conditional indirect effect of benevolent leadership on taking charge via work engagement was stronger and significant for followers with low RBSE but was not insignificant for followers with high RBSE. Therefore, we also encourage benevolent leaders to have more interactions with low RBSE followers and pay special attention to them.

5.4 Limitation and future research
Undeniably, this study has some limitations. First, we used a cross-sectional research design. Thus, the casual-effect associations cannot be inferred from our findings. Future research should employ a longitudinal research design to test the causal status of the associations in this study. Second, although this study used a multi-source multi-wave design, two key variables, work engagement and RBSE, were reported by employees at a single point. Therefore, it is possible that there is common method variance in our study. As recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2012), the significance of the work engagement-RBSE interaction effect cannot be affected. We also suggest that future research studies address potential common method variance by collecting data at differing waves.

Third, the data were collected from one large telecommunication corporation in China, which limited the generalizability of our results. Thus, future research should use samples from different industries, even from different countries. Fourth, we used work engagement as a type of “energized to” motivation, but other variables such as harmonious passion and positive affect may also reflect the affective state of the follower. An additional direction for future research is to examine the mediating roles of other variables in the relationship between benevolent leadership and taking charge. Fifth, benevolent leadership is also a dimension of paternalistic leadership. Different leadership styles in Chinese context, such as supportive leadership (Choi, 2007) and transformational leadership (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2012), may have similar but different effects on follower work engagement and taking charge. Future research should examine the relations between these leadership styles and followers’ taking charge.
References


About the authors
Qin Xu is a Lecturer in the School of Economics and Management, Southeast University. Her primary research interests are human resource management, transformational leadership, abusive supervision and proactive behavior.

Yixuan Zhao is an Assistant Researcher in the School of Business at Nanjing University. Her research interests include job characteristics, creative performance, well-being and millennial employees.

Meng Xi is an Assistant Researcher in the School of Business at Nanjing University. His primary research interests focus on the antecedents and consequences of abusive supervision, employment relationship and well-being, CEO values and behavior in the Chinese context. Meng Xi is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ximeng16@126.com

Shuming Zhao is a Senior Professor and a Honorary Dean of the School of Business, Nanjing University. His research interests include human resource management, manager’s competence and multinational business management.